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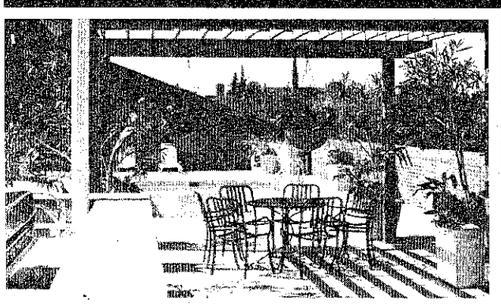

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Stretch Comedy

Exercise guru gets indecent exposure.

By Dave McKenna

Last week, Denise Austin co-hosted, along with Laura Bush, the annual Easter Egg Roll that drew hundreds of kids to the White House. That's Austin's element. The local exercise queen projects nothing but family and country and all-around health.

The good life has served Austin well: The Northern Virginian recently turned 50, yet she could pass for the daughter of somebody that age.

"I love what I do!" says Austin, as exclamatory and bubbly in civilian conversation as she is on the exercise mats.

Austin got her start working on the national workout show hosted by public fitness pioneer Jack LaLanne in 1981 and has now had her own programs on ESPN and the Lifetime Channel for 20 years. She has also sold 20 million exercise videos, good enough to get her inducted into the Video Hall of Fame.

"Right there with Jerry Bruckheimer and Steven Spielberg!" she says. "How great is that?"

And she's not going to slow down: She's just released two more DVDs: *Denise Austin's Boot Camp* and *Denise Austin's Fat Burning Dance Mix*.

The folks at the Idaho Potato Commission loved the aw-shucksy goodness she's always projected so much that in 2004 they made her the group's "healthy lifestyle spokesperson," replacing an animated figure named Spuddy Buddy.

"She's very wholesome, very well thought of, and a very credible person with our target audience, which is women 25 to 55," says Frank Muir, president and CEO of the Idaho Potato Commission, which oversees the state's $2.7 billion tuber industry.

But of late, another Austin persona has been developing on YouTube. She has no control over this new one.

In the Internet age, anything you've said or done can come back to be used against you, and it appears that all those years in leg warmers have caught up with Austin. Dozens of clips from Austin's TV career have been posted on the site in recent months. Folks have cut up Austin's healthy and wholesome routines into 30-second or so snippets and turned them into something, well, dirty.

Neither the posters nor, surmising solely from the barrage of published comments these clips have drawn, those who are viewing

the posts give a rip about the fitness advice or life-coaching Austin has doled out to viewers over her 20-plus years as a body beautifier.

Forget the 25- to 55-year-old women the tuber marketers are going after. The YouTubers who are paying so much attention to Austin seem like an all-male group. There is plenty of discussion from posters and commenters about isolating specific muscles and body parts—just not the abs or lats or any of the tissues that Austin's scripted workouts tend to zero in on.

This crowd focuses on what life would be like if she was, well, their personal Spuddy Buddy. And though there's a level of meanness to much of the dis-course, a lot of the verbiage is, with apologies to Ms. Austin, funny as hell.

Alas, most of the humorous comments attached to Austin's pages, like most of the unfunny ones, are not fit for mass consumption. Suffice it to say that every inch of her person is scrutinized with the sort of profane yet occasionally entertaining prose once found in such disreputable spots as Penthouse Forum. Phrases such as "camel toe" are thrown alongside descriptions of acts only folks who spend a lot of time dwelling on deviance could come up with.

Here's how deviant: Some clips, though taken from Austin's shows that appeared on the Lifetime Channel or ESPN, have been flagged by the YouTube community and given the equivalent of an NC-17 rating, where surfers are directed away from the video page to one that reads: "To view this video, please verify you are 18 or older by logging in or signing up."

The YouTube poster known on the site as Shane25 is among those to have sliced up old Austin tapes and made them available for public consumption. Via his YouTube page's e-mail, Shane25 says that he's "been very surprised by the comments to the Denise Austin videos," which he termed as "graphic to say the least." The popularity of his posts—his Austin collection, which includes such titles as "Nice Butt Shot and Doggy Style!!" and "Inner Thigh, Ass and Crotch Shot! Wow!!" has logged a few hundred thousand views thus far—also came as a shock.

"But I think that they (myself included) have this voyeuristic fascination with some these gorgeous exercise trainers and their morning programs," writes Shane25, who declines to give his real name. "Her exercising in those skimpy [clothes] can be a turn on. I know that might make me sound like a pervert or something but it's the truth and most guys would agree."

Austin says she's not aware she's become the object of so much perversion.

> "Her exercising in those skimpy [clothes] can be a turn on. I know that might make me sound like a pervert or something but it's the truth."
>
> —Shane25, Austin aficionado

"Now I'm worried!" she says with a giggle. "I went to YouTube to see that autistic kid playing basketball in New York. That was wonderful. But that's about it."

Dan Savage, the Seattle-based sexpert whose syndicated advice column, Savage Love, appears weekly in *Washington City Paper*, says Austin shouldn't be surprised by the onslaught. Anybody who gets enough exposure will eventually become a sex symbol. To wit: Clay Aiken and Sanjaya leave women weeping despite exuding less testosterone than a tutu.

After viewing some of the YouTube offerings, Savage says anybody who gains fame while "wearing shorts that display [her] vaginal lips" would tend to suffer this sort of god-awful objectification.

"Power is a two-headed dragon," says Savage. "She's sexually desirable because of her perceived power, and she's being belittled on YouTube because of her perceived power. This happens to men, too. In our culture, since we were monkeys, high status and perceived power makes something desirable."

"Nobody would be fucking Donald Trump if he was a janitor," Savage adds.

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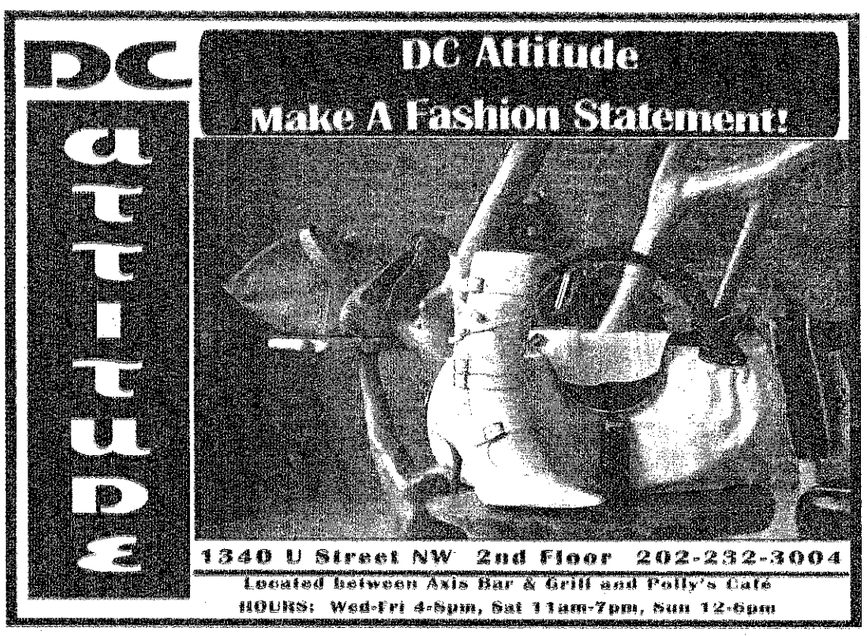
Links to the racy Denise Austin clips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